



I NEED YOU TO BREATHE

LOVE is the good news.

Kol Nidre 5778

It has been a breathless year. My therapist swore I wasn't the only one coming in, week after week, heart racing and head spinning from one executive order to the next. So it wasn't *only* for me that he coined the term "Executive Order Disorder" this spring. So many of us have been stuck in permanent reactive mode, suffering from a kind of daily whiplash from what's happening in our country. I've spoken with many of you who have had increased anxiety, depression, worry. We've become impatient, we're fighting with family members, we're gaining weight. The daily assault on what we know to be just and right has left us with an overwhelming sense not only of incredulity, but also of fragility.

And if only that were all we had to contend with. Looking around this room, I know that we are also holding grief: a parent, who lived long but suffered too much before dying. A spouse who just didn't wake up in the morning. A child. Many are holding loved ones who are not well and who will not get better. Some in heartache over a sibling bond irrevocably broken. Some fear growing old, some fear failure, some fear you won't be able to pay your bills. Some are desperately trying to get pregnant. Some, desperately trying to hold together the fraying edges of your marriage. At least a few are dealing this year with a break-up after decades of building a life together. Some are stuck between aging parents and struggling children. Some are struggling as you turn 50. Some as you turn 30. There's that pain in the left leg that has made it hard to walk. Those migraines that have made it hard to do *anything*. The worry for our parents, our children, our hearts... all of this *on top* of the Twitter tirades that just won't stop.

The Children of Israel were brutally enslaved in Egypt for more than 200 years when Moses signaled that liberation was near. "It's our time!" he said to the people. "God will free us from bondage and bring us home." But the people couldn't hear him, וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה מִקְצֶר רוּחַ וּמֵעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה -- because of shortness of breath and hard work (Ex 6:9). Know this: what Moses was promising was exactly what they had been praying for—for hundreds of years. But when it finally came, their situation is so bad that they couldn't even hear it.

This happens. Whether our foundation is shaken by a political reality or a personal one, we, like the Children of Israel, suffer from shortness of breath that makes it hard to hear, let alone think or process effectively.

That's where many of us are, these Holy Days: suffering from shortness of breath. The question tonight is: how do we get our breath back?

I have spent a lot of time lately arguing against the dumbing and numbing of American religious life. We have come to see the banner of God and religion waved in ways ranging from absurd to obscene, justifying cruel and regressive politics and policies, making a mockery of the very religious traditions they claim to celebrate. My focus has been twofold: on one hand, there's religious extremism, the exploitation of sacred texts to justify hatred and violence in God's name. And on the other, there's what I call religious routine-ism: rote, soulless, empty religiosity, reflecting widespread decay in the religious

system. These countervailing trends are profoundly alienating to a generation that considers itself spiritual but not religious, and can't flee the religious establishment quickly enough. Religion today has failed to capture the imagination of millions who are repelled by the viciousness of extremism and disenchanted by the dullness of routine-ism. *They refuse to choose between religion that's deadly and religion that is dead.*

But this past year, yet another trend has emerged in the bleak landscape of American religious life: religious escapism. This is the now dominant trend of religion as a pacifier. A diversion. This is thoughts-and-prayers religion. As in "our thoughts and prayers are with the victims of the hurricane," while we sit on our hands, lock our doors and shame anyone who dares to bring up the increased ocean temperatures that so clearly contributed to the intensity and relentlessness of the storms. We're deeply saddened by the school shooting/ hate crime/ Nazi march/ natural disaster, but let's not politicize a tragedy!

Religious escapist worship at the altar of the status quo, and they've had quite a revival in America over the past year. When Marx called religion the opium of the people, he was criticizing religion that quiets the oppressed masses. I wonder what he would think of religion that quiets the privileged masses?

It turns out there's more than one opioid addiction in this country; this one requires no needle or prescription, just a church or synagogue membership and a willingness to use religion as a drug to escape reality.

But religion is not meant to be an opiate—to dull our senses—but rather to be our *oxygen*, the fuel we need to breathe in a breathless time.

How does religious practice give us the strength not to escape the real challenges of the day, but to confront and move through them?

If you've spent any time around here before, you may have heard me share the story of an early encounter between Avram (before he became Avraham) and God. Why was he chosen by God to leave his homeland, his family, everything he knew and go to a strange and foreign land? The Midrash tells a parable of a traveler, en route from one place to another when he saw a *birah doleket*—a palace consumed in flames. He stopped and asked: How can it be that the palace burns with nobody taking care of it? Who is the *manhig*—who is the caretaker responsible for this place? At that moment, the owner of the palace poked his head out and responded: I am the owner of this place! So too, the Midrash says, Avraham looked out and saw that the world was on fire, and he wondered: How can it be that the world burns without someone trying to save it? Who is the *manhig*—who is the caretaker responsible for the world? At that moment, God responded: I am the owner of this place!¹

I love everything about this story. I love that, despite his busy life, this person looks up and sees that something is on fire. I love that he's a traveler—someone who is out of place, on the move, who has somewhere to go. Someone with plausible deniability: he could easily argue that this burning palace is not his problem. But he doesn't: he stops and asks. I love that he works on the moral assumption that *someone* must be responsible, demanding to know who it is. His question is what forces the owner to take responsibility, wills him out of disregard for his creation. And I love that the question is: "who is the

¹ Bereishit Rabbah 39:1

caretaker,” and the answer is: “I am the owner...” meaning *you, you who noticed that my house is on fire, you are now the caretaker.*

This is the Jewish origin story. The world is burning. Avraham asks God: What are You doing about it? God asks Avraham: What are YOU doing about it? Together, they go to put out the fire.

What does it mean to be descendants of Avraham? It means that our *spiritual inheritance* is to be awake. To see. And *la’asot tzedakah u’mishpat*— to be pursuers of justice and righteousness. Eternal good-guys. The vigilant ones. The Justice League. The your-struggle-is-my-business-people. We are the fighters, the defenders, the bearers of holy-hutzpah.

The first thing for us to know, in these breathless times, is that we must not be fazed or disheartened by these fires. There have always been palace fires; our most ancient spiritual calling is to see them. It’s in our spiritual DNA. Wakefulness. Willful opposition. Restless agitation... this isn’t knee-jerk liberalism. This is the great Jewish legacy, woven through Biblical and Rabbinic narratives over 4000 years, prodding us toward lives of courage and conviction.

As much as Judaism is about obedience to God and observance of *mitzvot*, the central moments of Israelite and Jewish history are characterized by defiance against unjust power structures. Our heroes are those who stood up for the vulnerable, who risked everything to fight for what is just and right—like Avraham did.

That’s what gives our lives purpose. But it can also, as we know from experience, take our breath away.

So let’s go back to that burning palace. *Birah doleket*, the midrash tells us. There’s a powerful ambiguity built into the text that allows us to read it not as a palace on fire, but as a palace radiant with light, as in *hadlakat nerot*. OK, then what does the story teach us? The traveler was on his way when he noticed a magnificent palace—a work of art!—radiating beauty. It stopped him in his tracks. “How can it be that such beauty exists in the world?” he asked. “Who’s responsible for this place?” And just then, the owner appeared and said, “Thank you for noticing My creation. Come, let’s work together to care for this place.”

Who then is Avraham? The one who sees beauty, when others are too busy, too distracted to notice. The one who stops in awe and wonder.

I don’t mean beauty as in glamour or luxury. I mean beauty in the way the Irish poet and philosopher John O’Donohue spoke of it. Beauty that:

“...ennobles the heart and reminds us of the infinity that is within us... [a sense of] emerging fullness... of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth... That’s why I find the aesthetic things, like poetry, fiction, good film, theater, drama, dance, and music, actually awaken that inside you and remind you that there is a huge interiority within you.”²

Think of the last time you experienced something truly awesome. Most of us access awe in nature—gazing at an expanse. Flying home from DC in July, I caught the famed four-hour sunset, when the plane was miraculously and blessedly paced with the setting sun, and I was lucky enough to get a window seat... (It was clearly God’s way of thanking me for sitting handcuffed for five hours in the Capitol police

² <https://onbeing.org/programs/john-odonohue-the-inner-landscape-of-beauty-aug2017/>

station after protesting the Senate’s vulgar attempt to strip health care from our most vulnerable citizens.) I wept the whole way home: swept up in the magnificence of God’s creation.

When we see something that beautiful, we call it breathtaking, but we really should call it *breathgiving*. When the vicissitudes of life constrict the heart, awe stretches it back out, making us more compassionate, more loving, more present. A couple of years ago a study from University of California psychologists proved just that: the experience of awe—which they define as “that sense of wonder we feel in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world”—actually promotes altruism, love and compassionate behavior.³

Here’s how it works: when we think we’re alone—it’s all on us—we despair. We suffer from קִצְרֵי רוּחַ—shortness of breath that our Rabbis say is really shortness of spirit, anguish, like the Children of Israel when Moses first appeared to them.⁴ We can’t hold it all. But when we experience awe—whether it’s the shared astonishment at the sight of the eclipse, the heart pumping ecstasy of a perfect harmony, the euphoria of *V’yetayu* in *Musaf* (if you don’t know what I’m talking about, you should stick around tomorrow), or the sense of shared purpose in a mass protest—like when a million people took to the streets in DC on January 21. Awe gives us our breath back, reminding us that we’re not the center of the world, and *that*, the study found, “causes people to become more invested in the greater good, give more to charity and volunteer to help others...”

Awe and wonder. “The profound and perpetual awareness of the wonder of being,” wrote Abraham Joshua Heschel, “...is one of the goals of the Jewish way of living: to experience commonplace deeds as spiritual adventures, to feel the hidden love and wisdom in all things.”⁵

מִי־כַמְכָּה בְּאֵלִים יְהוָה מִי כַמְכָּה נְאֻדָּר בְּקִדְּשׁ נִרְאָה תְהִלַּת עֲשֵׂה פִלְאָ:

*Who is like You, O LORD, among divine beings? Who is like You, majestic in holiness,
Awesome in splendor, working wonders!*

So which one is it? Is the palace burning down, or is it radiant with light? It’s clearly both. If all we see when we look at the world is the danger, the fire, we need to rediscover the beauty. And if all we see is endless beauty, we need to be reminded that there’s a lot of brokenness out there that needs fixing.

Wonder and heartache. Appreciation and agitation. The challenge of the religious life is to hold it all at once.

This brings me back to the religious quackery of escapism. The goal of the religious life is not to escape the world as it is, but to be awake to it: its bruises, its fires, its brokenness. But it’s also to breathe hope, life, love and possibility back into that broken world once we’ve gotten a glimpse of the wondrous, the beautiful, the magnificent. To help usher in the world that could be.

There is loss and there is love. Grief and grandeur. There is pain and there is possibility.

Scott’s beloved mother died a couple of weeks ago, just when Scott had hunkered down in a concrete shelter in Ft. Myers, Florida, where he was getting footage of Hurricane Irma. That night, in his grief, he texted me after he lost power: “We are right in the eye of the storm. There’s something incredibly

³ “Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior,” Paul Piff, PhD, University of California, Irvine, May 2015.

⁴ See Rashi and Degel Mahane Ephraim, among others.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 48-49.

impressive about it. The power of it.” Only precious few sensitive souls can hold the realization of the magnificence while literally braving the night in the burning palace.

A few days later, Scott returned home and sat shiva. The place was packed... with you: people who show up at the shiva. I explained that Scott had literally come from the eye of the storm and our job was to give him his breath back. I started a niggun. And without a word, you—with your love—stood, stepped in close, put your arms around Scott, Cipra and one another and sang the breath right back into him.

You saw Sami on Rosh Hashanah when she blew the shofar with her Savta. Two stories about my other two children: When Eva was little, because she was our first child and I was a guilt-ridden working mother, I kept a careful log tracking every sweet, funny, goofy or moving thing she said. Like the time she asked me: “Ima, is God dead?” I was a little surprised, and asked: “What makes you ask that, love?” “Well,” she said, “I know God’s very old, and I haven’t seen him in a long time, so I thought he was dead, like PaSam.”

Just before Rosh Hashanah, when Eva was three years old, I got some really sad news about someone in the community who had a terrible loss. It was all I could do to hold back my tears as Eva and I walked outside to get into the car. My heart was so heavy. It was gloomy outside from a thick layer of ominous cloud, which felt entirely appropriate. But then Eva proclaimed, “Ima, look- the sky is so pretty and blue.” “E,” I said, with a giant knot in my throat, “the sky is dark grey.” “No, Ima, it’s blue! It’s blue!” I was slightly annoyed, and a little concerned that she might be color blind. But she pointed up to the corner of the sky where there was, in fact, a tiny patch of bright, beautiful blue peeking out of the dark clouds. She was right, the sky was blue. I was so caught up in the grey that I didn’t even notice.

Ten years later, just a couple of weeks ago, I’m on my way to shul with Levi, who is eight. He’s says he has a question, but doesn’t want to hurt my feelings. Finally, he bursts out: “Ima—every day we’re talking about all the bad news. When do we get to talk about the good news?”

I shared these two stories when we gathered at the beach on Sunday for tashlikh, and asked us to consider: what’s the good news? We know all about the dark clouds. Where’s the small patch of blue? I collected cards with your answers, and Carol made a beautiful prayer wall from them—I hope you’ll all spend a few minutes meditating and reflecting over there at some point over our next day together.

Here’s what I noticed, looking at the hundreds of answers you handed over: Levi’s right. We spend a lot of our time these days talking about how the palace is burning. Every hour, every alert on our phones brings another devastating surprise. But there’s also a lot of good news out there. There’s a lot of beauty and a lot of wonder. And most of what you wrote—maybe 80% of the cards—were about one particular brand of radiant light pouring from the palace. See if you can catch the common theme:

- i. My family loves me
- ii. My cousins love me
- iii. I have my health (poo poo poo) and I have love in my life.
- iv. Soul friends have become family.
- v. Rachie and Jeremiah
- vi. Becca and R’ Nate
- vii. Loving family
- viii. Loving friends
- ix. Holding on to the belief that I’ll find my bashert one day

- x. Secure love
- xi. Secret love
- xii. Making love (nobody wrote that but I'm assuming some of you meant to)
- xiii. Making music I love
- xiv. Working with people I love
- xv. Waking up next to my soulmate
- xvi. Being home, surrounded by love
- xvii. Finding a community of loving friends who give me warm hugs, deep laughs and faith in humanity
- xviii. After many years, finding the love of my life
- xix. Seeing love and humanity amidst the resistance to evil
- xx. The best thing ever that I like is my mommy

And more and more and more. You wrote about your love of travel, love of music, love of your cats, love of recreational marijuana, and even your love of the Columbia College football team. My good news? The love people in this community show one another.

Love is the good news. Love is the palace radiating light. Love is what gives us our breath back.

My friend, Valarie Kaur, a Sikh American civil rights activist who is here with us tonight, spoke at midnight mass at Metropolitan AME Church in DC on New Year's Eve this past year. Many of you heard or read her words:

We have seen darkness before...The mother in me asks what if... this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor?

What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don't push we will die. If we don't push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love...

This is not the love of oozing sentimentality, but the love that is the driving force for social movements around the world. This is the stuff of poets, parents and prophets, those who understand love to be, as Valarie says, "an inexhaustible wellspring that can inspire and embolden us to rise up with courage we did not know we had."⁶

Despite the intoxicating pull of escapist religion, the heart of our tradition doesn't want us to be comfortable in the world as it is. It's a rebellion against that world. The goal is not to be quieted, to feel good, to get comfortable and settled while the palace burns. It is to be awake and to fight—with love—for the courage we need, for the family we yearn for, for the community we're called to be, for the world we want our children to inherit. Wonder and indignation. Appreciation and agitation.

There is reason for our breathlessness. We're holding a lot. Maybe too much. But know this: we can't sustain the battles of our lives with *kotzer ruah*, with shrunken spirits.

⁶ <http://www.revolutionarylove.net/>

All around us I see evidence of a new dawn rising. But it's up to us to ensure the triumph of love over hatred. We have to let the light in. It's *ahavah rabbah*—the big love of a new day—and *ahavat olam*—the eternal love that sustains us through the dark of night, that can lift us from our despair, our worry, and our fear, offering us another way.

Tonight I remember the words of Antoine Leiris, who took back his own breath after terrorists murdered his beloved wife at the Bataclan in Paris two years ago:

On Friday evening you stole the life of an exceptional person, the love of my life, the mother of my son, but you will not have my hatred.

No, I will not give you the satisfaction of hating you. You want it, but to respond to hatred with anger would be to give in to the same ignorance that made you what you are.

You would like me to be scared, for me to look at my fellow citizens with a suspicious eye, for me to sacrifice my liberty for my security. You have lost...

I saw her this morning. At last, after nights and days of waiting. She was as beautiful as when she left on Friday evening, as beautiful as when I fell head over heels in love with her more than 12 years ago.

Of course I am devastated with grief, I grant you this small victory, but it will be short-lived.

I know she will be with us every day and we will find each other in the heaven for free souls to which you will never have access.

Us two, my son and I, we will be stronger than every army in the world. I cannot waste any more time on you as I must go back to [my son] who has just woken from his sleep.

He is only just 17 months old, he is going to eat his snack just like every other day, then we are going to play like every other day and all his life this little boy will be happy and free.

Because you will never have his hatred either.⁷

He chose love. We, too, can choose the breathgiving lifeforce of love.

When we predicate our lives on wakefulness and wonder, when we show up at shiva, when we make holy music together in here and raise holy hell together out there, when we see sacred text as art and train our eyes to see through the lens of gratitude first... well, we make room for breath even in the most breathless moments. We reveal that we are who we are, even still.

I close with the words of Rev. Lynn Ungar: I Need You to Breathe.

Breathe, said the wind.

How can I breathe at a time like this,
when the air is full of the smoke

⁷ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34862437>

of burning tires, burning lives?

Just breathe, the wind insisted.

Easy for you to say, if the weight of
injustice is not wrapped around your throat,
cutting off all air.

I need you to breathe.

I need you to breathe.

Don't tell me to be calm
when there are so many reasons
to be angry, so much cause for despair!

*I didn't say to be calm, said the wind,
I said to breathe.
We're going to need a lot of air
to make this hurricane together.*

There are hurricanes that bring death and destruction, and there are hurricanes that herald a new day. A day free of the pain that plagues us, free of the cruelties and system failures that bind us. Hurricanes that are driven by love and breath, that usher in the winds of change and possibility. That remind us that each and every one of us was put here to bring light and love to the world.

We don't need to escape. We need to remember how to breathe.

As Mother Teresa taught us: "we have been created for greater things, not just to be a number in the world, not just to go for diplomas and degrees, this work and that work. We have been created in order to love and be loved."⁸ And that, friends, is the good news.

⁸ Mother Teresa, No Greater Love, p. 30.